

Let Us Encourage One Another

Hebrews 10:11-25

November 15, 2009

I really like the book of Hebrews. It's probably because there are so many phrases in it that bring into my mind significant moments on my journey of faith. Although the book is included among the letters written by Paul, it's actually not a letter nor was it written by Paul. The scholars inform us that it's really a sermon written by some unknown author. The work was so widely read and loved by the people in the early church that they made it known that they wanted it to remain available. And so, those who compiled the final collection of books we know as the New Testament included it as one of Paul's letters which was necessary in order for it to be accepted.

At any rate the book of Hebrews is one of those books that I've been tempted on occasion to simply preach it as it is written. I actually did it a few years ago. I got up one morning and stood in front of a pulpit in a church and preached it. It was an interesting experience. No one was present you understand. I did it for myself just to see what it would feel like.

Although the whole sermon is important, there are those passages which practically jump off the page when I read them. Many of them are passages I memorized during the early years of my faith journey – passages I've found to be helpful or meaningful. There's really no way I can mention all of those passages this morning but I thought I'd share a few of them with you.

In chapter two, verse 9, the unknown author wrote: "But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now drowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone." And in verse 11 of chapter two: "Both the one who makes (people) holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So, Jesus is not ashamed to call them (us) brothers and sisters." Still in chapter two, now verse 18 though: "Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."

Twice he quotes those radical words of the Old Testament book of Jeremiah, verses 33 & 34 of the 31st chapter: "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds. Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more."

Chapter eleven is probably my favorite chapter - actually, chapter eleven and the beginning of chapter twelve. It's a passage I often share at funerals. "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." And then follows this powerful litany about those who've been faithful: "By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith Enoch was taken from this life ... by faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family ... by faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went ... by faith Sarah ... by faith Isaac ... by faith Joseph ... by faith Moses' parents ... by faith Moses ..." And on and on the chapter goes.

And then, verse 1 of chapter twelve is one I read before almost every one of my athletic contests in high school and college: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

Verses 1 & 2 in chapter thirteen reads: "Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it." And finally, still

in chapter thirteen, but now verse 8: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” Read the book and see what verses stick out for you.

But the ones were going to take a closer look at today are those read a few moments ago, chapter ten, verses 11-25. In the first part of this portion of the sermon, the author pretty much repeats the basic theme of the whole sermon. It is the good news of our faith. It is the gospel. “Christ’s sacrifice was once-for-all.” Our salvation has so fully been provided for that the temple sacrificing is no longer necessary. Our sins are forgiven and we need not do anything to earn it. Salvation is ours because of Christ’s sacrifice. We don’t have to earn it. It’s freely given. Animals don’t have to be sacrificed anymore to appease the gods. We don’t have to gaze upon a special rock we carry around with us. We don’t earn our salvation by performing rituals.

Hear the way the author puts it again: “Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, ‘he sat down at the right hand of God,’ and since then has been waiting ‘until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.’ For by a single sacrifice he has made perfect for all time those who are being made holy.”

And then comes that quote from Jeremiah again with this little added assurance: “I will remember their sins and lawless deeds no more.’ Where there is forgiveness of sin, there is no longer any offering for sin.” We are forgiven people. That’s the good news! We don’t have to make any sacrifices for our sins. Christ is the sacrifice and he has taken care of it for all times. He is our access to God – our Savior. Accept it – believe it!

Now, writes the author of Hebrews, this theological understanding of Christ’s life, death and resurrection should make an impact on how we live our lives though. Even though we don’t have to do anything to earn our salvation, there are some ways of living that ought to become a part of our existence – our way of relating – in response to what Christ has done on our behalf.

The author turns from theologizing – head and heart stuff about God and Jesus – to some practical ideas about some activities that should be part of our living as a result of Christ’s sacrifice. Verse 19 signals the shift: “Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil and guilty conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.”

And then the author offers a practical application that he maintains should result from the beliefs he has outlined: “And let us consider how we may spur one another one toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the day approaching.”

Now, the author of Hebrews was talking to those who were believers – to those who accepted that through Christ’s sacrifice they were saved – to those who made up the early church. “Let us consider how we may spur – how we may provoke – how we may stir up – one another toward love and good deeds.” “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit.” And, “let us encourage one another.” The writer of the sermon we have in the book of Hebrews envisioned those who accepted Christ’s free gift of salvation as a community of

faith – a people – who would challenge one another to do good and to love – a community of faith who would meet together whatever the cost – a community of faith who would encourage one another.

The vision hasn't changed friends. People who make up the church – who have accepted God's gracious gift of forgiveness and salvation – should love one another and be doers of good. They/we need to meet together on a regular basis. And they/we need to be encouragers – not only for the good of the church and of those who are part of the fellowship but also as a witness to those beyond our community of faith. Society needs people who love and who do good and who encourage – who do no harm – who stay in love with God. I want to spend a few moments concentrating on the importance of our being encouragers both within the fellowship of believers and in our community.

There was a math teacher once by the name of Helen. One Friday she noticed that her students were growing increasingly frustrated with themselves. She'd made several attempts to teach them a particular math concept and they just weren't getting it. It happens sometimes even when teachers use their very best techniques and students are trying.

Finally, Helen decided that she needed to do something to change the atmosphere in the room. The students were becoming short with one another. So Helen stopped teaching and asked the students to take out a blank piece of paper. Then she had them write the names of each of their classmates along the left side of the piece of paper, leaving some space between each name. Then she told them to write the nicest thing they could think of about each of their classmates and write it in the space below each name.

Over the weekend Helen compiled the lists. On Monday she gave each of the students her/his list. Before long the entire class was smiling and making comments: "Really?" she heard whispered across the aisles, "You think that about me?" And then from the back of the room she heard: "I never knew that meant anything to anyone!" And then there was, "I didn't know others liked me so much!" The exercise seemed to have accomplished what she had hoped. The students were happy with themselves and with one another again.

Several years later, Helen learned that one of those students, Mark Eklund, was killed in Vietnam. She attended his funeral and then gathered afterwards with his friends at the Eklunds' home. Mark's parents approached her and his father said, "We want to show you something." With that, he opened his billfold and he removed two worn pieces of notebook paper that had been taped, folded and refolded many times. Then he said, "They found this on Mark when he was killed. We thought you might recognize it." The papers were indeed the ones on which she had listed all the good things each of Mark's classmates had said about him. Mark's mother then said, "Thank you so much for doing that. As you can see, Mark treasured it."

Mark's classmates heard the exchange. One named Chuck smiled sheepishly as he spoke: "I still have my list too. It's in the top drawer of my desk at home." Another student's wife said, "John asked me to put his in our wedding album." Another one, named Marilyn, reached into her purse, took out her wallet and showed her worn and frazzled list to the group. "I carry mine with me all the time."

Mark Twain once commented that he could live on a good compliment for two months. A Japanese proverb proclaims: "One encouraging word can warm three months." Encouraging words make a difference in people's lives. The people who are the church – you and me – need to make it a principle of our living and our relating.

There was a logging operation in the northwest part of the country. The superintendent of it had as his deputy a young university student. There came a time when this superintendent had to be away for awhile. He confidently left the operation in the care of his young deputy. Before leaving though, he briefed the student on the situation. “You shouldn’t have any trouble,” he said, “except possibly from one man named Tony. He can be difficult, even rebellious. But on no account are you to fire him. He is the best logger in the northwest.”

The next day, the young deputy went around to see the loggers at work. Eventually he came to Tony. After conversing with him for a time, the young deputy said before moving on: “Tony, the boss tells me you are the best logger in the northwest – that there isn’t anyone who can touch you at the job.”

That night, when the whistle blew, Tony was waiting for his temporary boss. He invited him to his home for supper. As they sat around the table enjoying the meal, Tony told his wife what the young man had told him earlier – that the boss man thought he was the best logger in the northwest, and that there wasn’t a man who could touch him.

Tony’s wife got up from the table – wiped her hands on her apron – went over to her guest and put her arms around him as she said with tears in her eyes: “Tonight is like Christmas in our house.” Tony was jabbing the air with his fork as he said: “Why didn’t he ever tell me that himself? There were days when I could have killed somebody.”

People need encouragement. Every one of us needs to be encouraged and needs to give encouragement. As the body of Christ we are to be encouragers – cheerleaders if you will spurring one another to love and good works. If we would adopt the role of encourager in our lives, we could make an impact where we work, in our schools, in our own homes, in the places we frequent at mealtime. There’s power in encouragement – as persons saved by the grace of God it needs to be a power we willingly share. To paraphrase a saying attributed to the founder of United Methodism, John Wesley: “In all the time we have it is surely our duty to do all the good we can, to all the people we can, in all the ways we can.”

Let us pray.